

Words Warren Singh-Bartlett

A LEGACY OF GEMS

For the past 155 years, Lebanese jeweler Tabbah has been creating signature pieces that capture the world's imagination



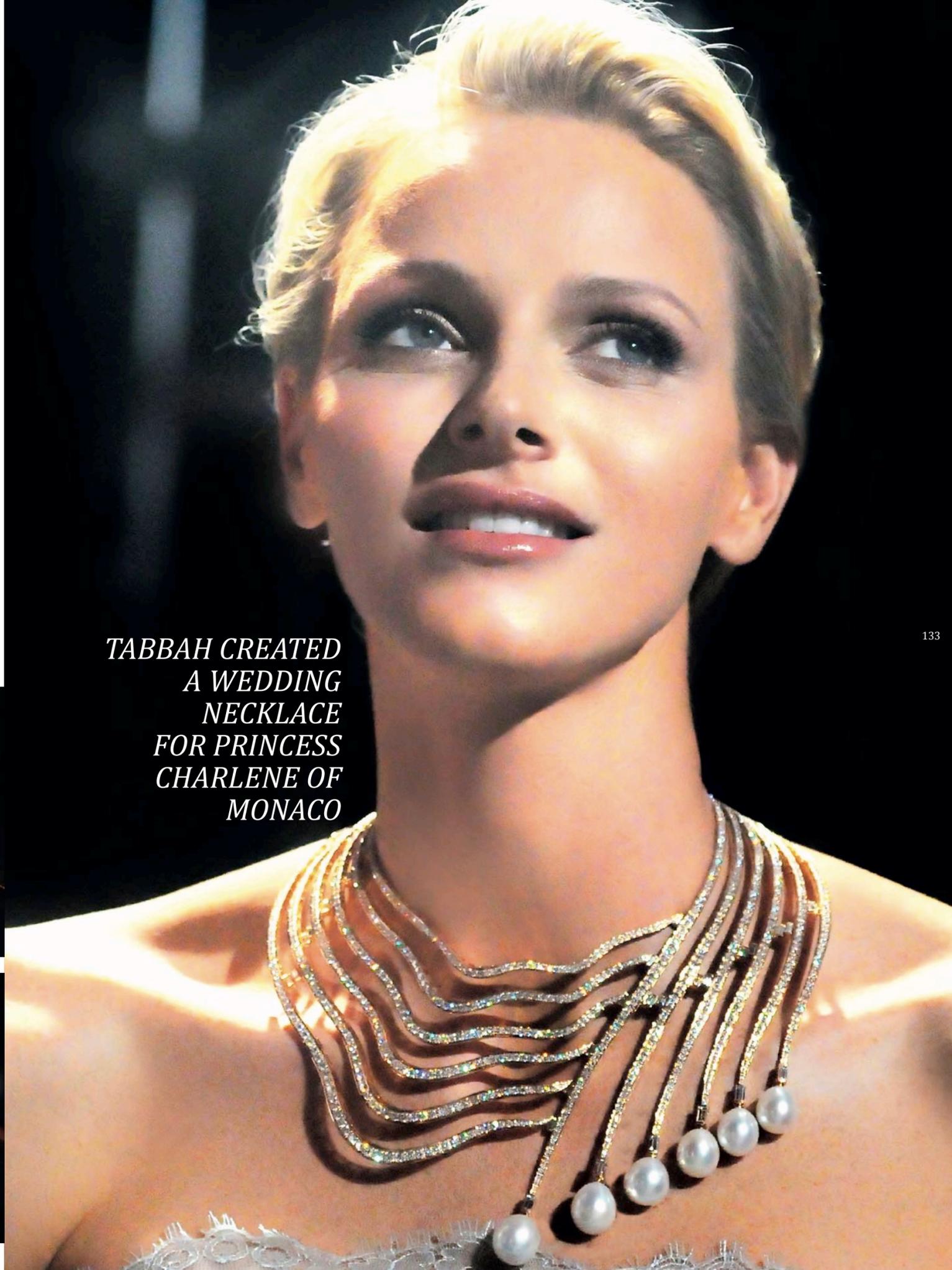
It's telling that my interview with Nagib Tabbah, scion of the Lebanese jewelry dynasty, begins with a discussion of definition. He's been reading Maurice Saatchi's concept of "one-word equity," the idea that in the future, companies will be defined by a single word because people don't have the time to read anymore. The writer in me rebels. Without words, how is genuine communication possible? But Tabbah's enthusiasm is contagious, and the idea does have a certain Haiku-esque intrigue. So what, I ask, is the word for the family business? Tabbah smiles.

"I would say 'Infinite.' First, because creativity is infinite, it's only limited by your imagination. Second, craftsmanship is also infinite, because you are always challenging those you create with, and finally because your clients want the pieces you make for them to be timeless, infinite."

The answer feels effortless, but I suspect that it is the result of a great deal of deliberation. As the jewelry that has made the Tabbah family reputation reveals, deliberation informs everything they do. "Sometimes we can spend hours talking about a curve. How can you talk about a curve for hours? Well, it's about how the light is going to shine on it."



TABBAH CREATED
A WEDDING
NECKLACE
FOR PRINCESS
CHARLENE OF
MONACO



If we change the angle, how will that affect it? If we do it slightly polished and satin finished, what then? So you try it out and go back, try and go back. This is how you can talk for hours about a curve, and this is how committed we are to each of our pieces."

And so at Tabbah's Karantina atelier, you'll find cutters, polishers, goldsmiths and setters, every specialty needed to create a piece of jewelry from start to finish. In this respect, the house is unique, for these days, even most high-end jewelers outsource some of their work – usually the final setting of the stones – rather than retain all the necessary in-house specialists.

But then Tabbah is also one of the few high-end houses that still offer a bespoke service. Clients (Tabbah calls them "friends we make beautiful jewelry for") can have pieces custom-made, either of their own design or worked up with the house. The service accounts for a fraction of business, although being able to make a wedding necklace for say, Princess Charlene of Monaco, does burnish their credentials. And with the effective demise of high-end bespoke jewelry-making elsewhere, it also brings in clients from all over the world.

"Go to one of the places on Place Vendôme and try to make a ring and see what happens," Tabbah continues. "They put so many conditions, it's so expensive and they tell you it will take so long to make. They are basically refusing without saying 'no.'"



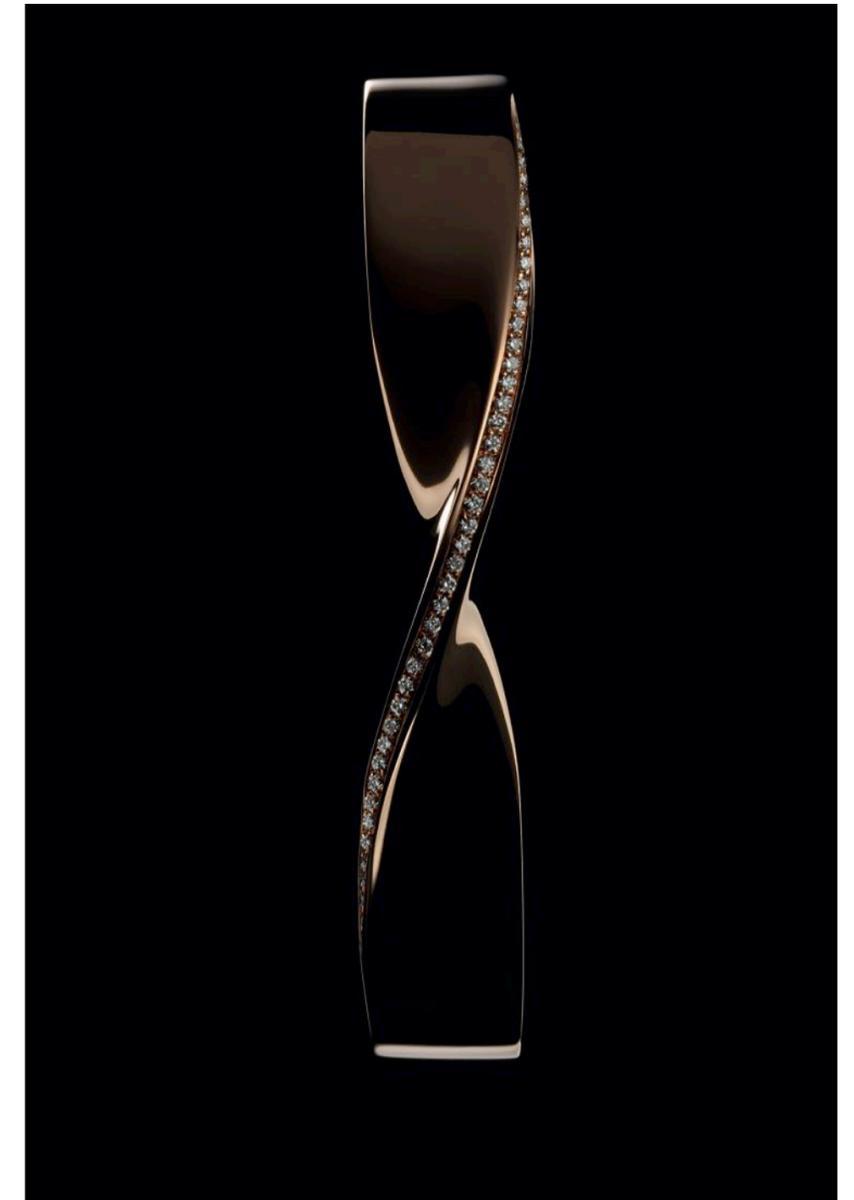
The reason is cost, but then Lebanon isn't exactly a cheap place to do business, so I wonder how sustainable this service could be here? While acknowledging the (rising) cost, Tabbah's view is more holistic.

"The question is really how much longer we can do it. Even 25 years ago, we questioned how sustainable it could be to operate from Lebanon. It is expensive, but take my team. If I design a curve, they understand it immediately because we've spent years working together. Some of them even worked with my father and my grandfather. If I try to have this discussion elsewhere, they won't have the same understanding."

"If you give a design to three different craftsmen, a European, an Asian, a Lebanese, each masters, their interpretations will be completely different. The French, for example, are minimalistic. The generosity of the Orient is not there. We give more, but not to the extent that it becomes vulgar. Here, there is this generosity. But there's a restraint, too. What we make is opulent, but it's also wearable."

The bulk of business is in ready-made, whether these are high-end or casual pieces. The Beret ring, for example, is an icon that recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. Tabbah are jewelers who believe that because every piece serves as their calling card to the world, every piece must be worked to the best of their abilities, and so bespoke, high-end or casual, everything is made by the same craftsmen. "We don't have a team that does the casual jewelry and another for the high-end. So the Beret ring is made by master craftsmen. I have the same person doing both, the most amazing craftsmanship for a casual ring. This is unique. This is Tabbah."

In the 155 years that the house of Tabbah has been making jewelry (Joseph Tabbah shifted the family business from wooden printing blocks for the silk industry into jewelry in 1862), tastes have changed radically, even in the world of high jewelry. The glittering designs of the 1930s, '40s and '50s are no longer fashionable, and most modern women aspire to be stylish rather than glamorous. Changing tastes do not mean that the desire for impeccably made pieces has diminished, but as jewelry has become more accessible, financially and conceptually, the work of the jeweler has also changed. These days, it isn't enough to make something sumptuous, one also has to weave a story around it.



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This is why the real jewel in the Tabbah crown may be the collective expertise amassed over the course of a century and a half. Listening to him explain some of his pieces, Tabbah almost has me wanting to buy one – and I don't wear a watch, let alone jewelry.

"First of all," he says showing me a photo of an exquisitely undulating ring bristling with diamonds, sapphires and a lozenge-sized emerald, "I would ask the client to run her finger along the edge. She'll notice that it feels

sensual, like a second skin. The piece has to be a pleasure to touch. Then we talk about the colors. What do they say? Does the intensity of the green, for example, match the intensity of the blue? Then we turn it over. It should be even more beautiful on the reverse. If you set stones in a honeycomb, when you turn it over, it's still a work of art. Finally, I would ask if her heart was beating more quickly. Did the piece touch her? And it's funny because when she puts it on, that's it. There's no way anyone's going to get it off her again."

